

Were You There? Sermon Series  
Sermon #5 – The Good Thief  
April 2, 2006  
Kory Wilcoxson

You all know what oxymorons are, don't you? Two words or phrases put together that have opposite meanings. Let's spend some time alone together. Wow, that's pretty ugly. She's an advanced beginner. That was a brief sermon. Buck Owens, the country singer who died recently, had a hit with the song, "Act Naturally." I once had a colleague who said I had clearly misunderstood what he was saying. How do you clearly misunderstand something? And when you go to shut down a computer, what button do you hit? The "Start" button. The world is full of oxymorons.

So is the gospel. Think about it: the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. Jesus says, "When you helped out the least of these, you helped out me." Those who try to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will save it. We worship an oxymoron: crucified savior.

Here's another one: the good thief. A good thief. That's a bit like something being completely unfinished or a genuine imitation, isn't it? We don't know enough about this man to know for sure, but usually there's nothing good about thieves. In Jesus' time, a thief could be guilty of any number of crimes, from petty burglary to crimes committed directly against the Roman leaders. Maybe this guy pickpocketed Pilate or try to sell a centurion a fake sundial. We don't know. It's doubtful that he would be given such an extreme penalty for a petty crime, but maybe the Romans wanted to set an example even more extreme than cutting off his hands or giving him a public beating.

We shouldn't spend too much time on his crime, though, because in the end it doesn't matter. He could have been a thief, a murderer, a tax evader, it doesn't matter. Jesus doesn't ask the man to give an accounting of his wrongdoings. Jesus simply hears this man's plea – remember me when you come into your kingdom – then assures him of a place in paradise that very day.

That, I believe, is what we all strive for. Paradise. When we looked at this passage in our Bible study a few weeks ago, I asked the people there how they defined paradise, and I got sublime responses. Peace. Harmony. Good health. No worries. Lots of chocolate. Yes, Perry is a part of that group! It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? In a sense, the quest for paradise is what has driven humankind to push their boundaries. From explorers like Columbus and Magellan, to our own Manifest Destiny that drove the frontier westward, to space exploration, we are looking for our own paradise.

And yet, as the thief learns, true paradise cannot be achieved, but only received, and only God controls who receives it. This episode is what you would call a deathbed conversion, right? At the last moment, a scoundrel who's lived a shadowy life repents and gets the key to heaven right before his last breath. We're supposed to cheer, right? Another lost sheep is found! That's all well and good when the story stays matted on the pages of scripture, but what about when it happens in real life?

I'm sure many of you saw the movie "Dead Man Walking" with Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon, who won an Oscar for her performance. Penn is Matthew Poncelet, a man accused of murder, and Sarandon is Sister Helen Prejean, who visits Poncelet in jail and tries to help him admit to his crime. For much of the movie Poncelet is like the first

thief on the cross: angry, sarcastic, defiant. It's only during his final hours that he truly opens up and repents of his sins, admitting that he was one who committed the murders. And then he is executed by lethal injection, arms spread out as if he were on a cross.

I know a lot of people who had trouble with the theological concept at work here. Why should a murderer receive forgiveness and enter into the same kingdom as me? I've never killed, I've never committed any really bad sins, and yet I'm going to be seated at the heavenly banquet table next to Matthew Poncelet?

Yes, we are, and probably next to a lot of other people we don't expect to see there. That's the beauty of the good news of Jesus Christ: he died so that we all might have new life. And all means all, even those people we think don't deserve it.

This was underscored for me in a poem that Saford Wilson sent me not too long ago:

I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven's door,  
not by the beauty of it all, by the lights or its decor.  
But it was the folks in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp--  
the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics, the trash.  
There stood the kid from seventh grade who swiped my lunch money twice.  
Next to him was my old neighbor who never said anything nice.  
Herb, who I always thought was rotting away in hell,  
was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well.  
I nudged Jesus, "What's the deal? I would love to hear your take.  
How'd all these sinners get up here? God must've made a mistake.  
And why's everyone so quiet, so somber? Give me a clue."  
Hush, child," said He. "They're all in shock. No one thought they'd see you."

That's the hard truth that the Good Thief and "Dead Man Walking" force us to confront. There is no prioritization of sins in the Bible. Believe me, I've looked! There's not a chapter in Numbers or Zechariah that says, "Lying is a one-star sin, cheating is three-star sin, and murder is five-star sin." It's not there. What is there is this, in Romans: "All have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God." All. That's you and me and Matthew Poncelet and every other person you can think of, good or bad. The Bible doesn't separate us based on our sins. All have fallen short.

That's the beauty of the gospel; that's the essence of the good news. We've all fallen short, but we'll never fall so far that we're out of God's reach. That's good news for those of us who try hard to live Christian lives, but that's great news for the thieves and the liars and the trash, the people we don't expect to see. Even they can still be called a child of God.

At one point in "Dead Man Walking," Sister Prejean looks at Poncelet and says, "You are a son of God." Through his tears he says, "Thank you. I've never been called a son of God before." Then he laughs and says, "I've been called a son of a you-know-what plenty of times, but I've never been called a son of God."

I'm guessing the Good Thief had been called a son of a you-know-what plenty of times, but had never been called a son of God until he was dying on the cross. He is proof that one act of faith can save even the worst of sinners. He is proof that we are living oxymorons: we are saved sinners. The issue is not the greatness of our sin but our willingness to admit our need for help and to believe.

Admit our need for help. There you go. There's the stumbling block for so many of us. How can we be helped if we don't admit our need for it? How can we worship a Savior if we think we don't need to be saved? I bet the Good Thief spent most of his life relying completely on his own abilities. It was him against the world, and he had what it takes to make it, doggone it. He could pull himself up by his bootstraps, fend for himself, look out for number one. He didn't need handouts or hand-me-downs or a helping hand, until his hands had nails through them.

It's hard to walk in the path of the righteous when your feet are nailed to a cross. It was there, at his lowest point, at his most helpless, that the thief looked beyond himself and saw, not another criminal or vagabond or low-life, but a king. "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." And with Jesus' response, the Thief is given the key to paradise.

When Christ went up on that cross, he took with him the penalty for our sins. He became guilty of murder, of infidelity, of child molesting, of lying, of genocide, of gossiping, and of thievery. He took all that with him to the cross. He's not there because of what he did, he's there because of what the thief did. And you did. And I did.

I stole a candy bar once. I've never told anybody this. I was in seventh grade, and my friends and I were at the local 7-11. Someone had left a Snickers lying on the video game we were playing. One of my friends asked me, "Is that yours?" and in a moment of mindless bravado and earthshaking stupidity I put it in my pocket and said, "It is now."

I quickly walked out of the store, but I was followed by the clerk, who stopped me and said, "Do you have a candy bar in your pocket?" "Yes." "Did you pay for that candy bar?" "No." I was already envisioning the penalty for my crime: a call to my mom, handcuffs and flashing blue lights. Then the lady pulled a dollar bill out of her pocket and said, "That's OK. I'll pay for it." And she walked away.

The Good Thief says, "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve." For our sins, for the things we have done and the things we have left undone, for the things we have said and the things we should have said, there is a penalty to pay. But Christ has said, "That's OK. I'll pay for it." Can he do that for you? All you have to do is ask. Jesus, remember me.